

WHAT BINGHAMTON PUTS ON THEIR POSTCARDS

Signs and symbols: Six
carousels 'cross the county –
children's toys where refuse buys a ride,
litter gets you revolutions
on a laminated Lippizzan.

Two-tone herbivores, funny-page
dinosaurs with sawed-off smiles –
Johnny Hart's Neanderthal vision welcoming
visitors to our parks and PGA course.

Sixties television mystique, Serling's
clutch on cigarette, smoke on his coat
like clouds on a September night. The mountains
uttering his upstate rhythm:

Binghamton, New York. Population: sixty-seven thousand.

A small town, similar to one that you can name.

*Like any place where people congregate,
it is both light and shadow, river and rock – a small patch
of ground, here in The Twilight Zone.*

Heated air in August sky, a panorama of colored fabric
on Friday afternoon – ten thousand amassed to see baskets
above treelines, hear propane roar and wonder
what France must have thought when the first balloons
made contact with birds.

These are the pictures of Binghamton:
Hot air balloons, cavemen comic strips,
carousels and a TV show not of sight, but of mind.

I propose that the image of Binghamton be The Metrocenter –
a two-floor, eighty-store ambition dead-center downtown.
Built when I was a boy, complete
with Walk of Fame, bronzed stars, a sky tube to carry shoppers
and – in my opinion – the fourth best pizza around.

But tourists and university students don't see that.
Half of the edifice is closed off – placards in the windows
offer commercial space, not deep discounts. Non-profit HQs
where a Hallmark used to show its Christmas collection.
Weeds poke through the honored names. The Plexiglas
on the sky tube is cracked, its concrete floor
graffitied to let people know Jesus
is a #1 pimp.
Penguin Pizza is long gone.

Yet The Metrocenter is true to its name: it is a center of urban space.
Just not a mall, a shopping palace. It is decay
of the best kind – wounded but standing, unknown
to tourists. But the townies remember.

The townies remember all.